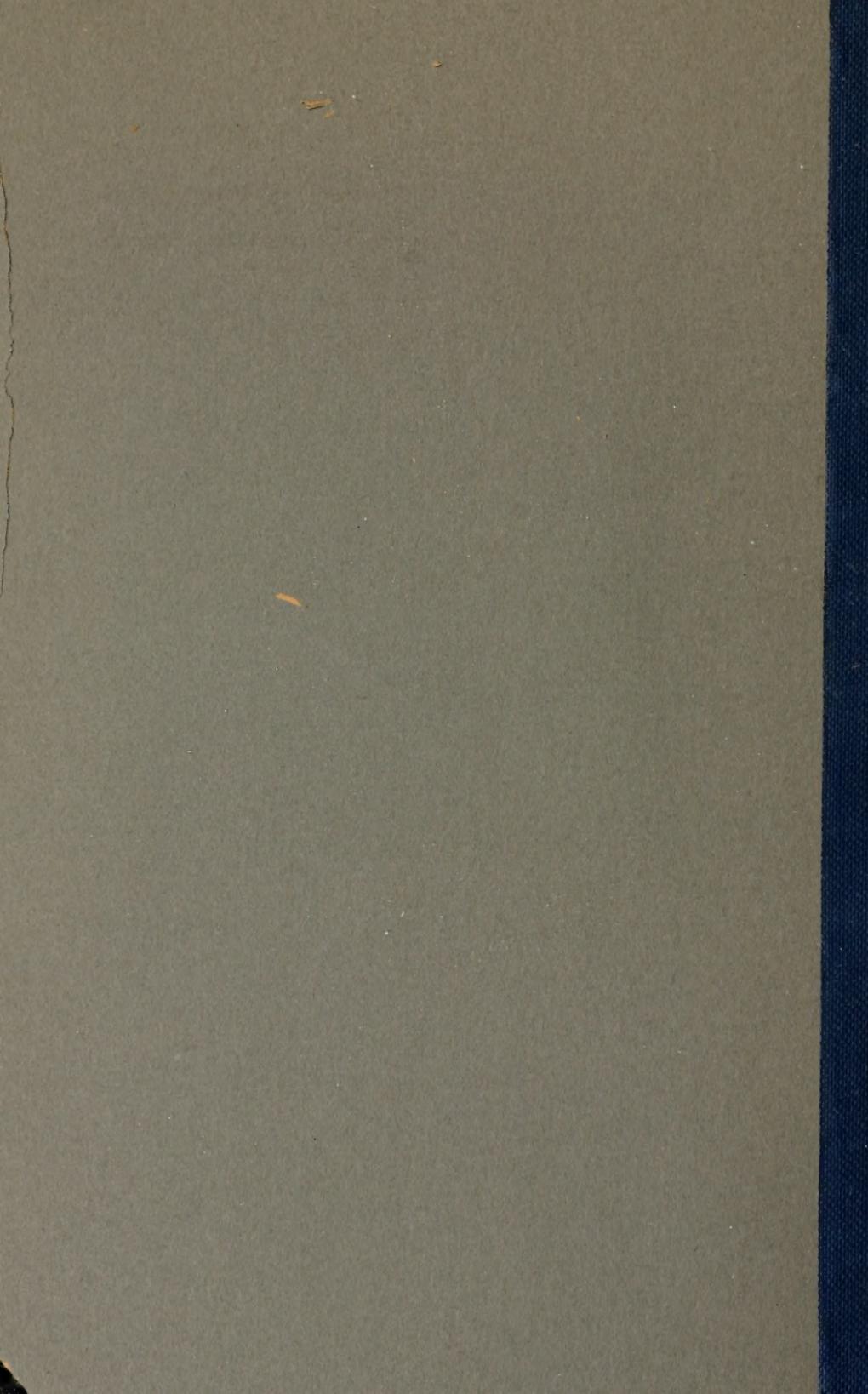


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Some thoughts about verse

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THE ENGLISH ASSOCIATION

Pamphlet No. 55

Some Thoughts about Verse

By

T. S. Omord



January, 1923

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## Some Thoughts about Verse

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## SOME THOUGHTS ABOUT VERSE

WHY people make verse is the first question that confronts a prosodist.<sup>1</sup> Various answers have been given. It aids recollection, say some: "Thirty days hath September, &c." is remembered more easily through being couched in rude metre. That is true, but is surely inadequate as an explanation of so wide-reaching a tendency. "Economy of effort" is put forward by certain philosophers; as if artistic natures were inclined to be sparing of exertion in work that they love. A deeper cause must be found, and seems supplied by the obvious fact that in moments of high emotion it is more natural to dance than to walk, to sing than to speak, to use measured language if any. Emotion seeks rhythmical expression; the two are inseparably connected. Mere excitement, indeed, prompts to shout rather than to sing. But high, heart-felt emotion—and is not this the very *essentia* of poetry?—has always urged men to cadenced speech long before David elegized Saul and Jonathan or cried in his anguish "O Absalom, my son, my son!" The mere form sometimes stirs the feeling, and some profess to find this when hearing verse in an unknown language. However this may be, the close connexion of emotional thought with measured language needs no demonstration.

Poetry, to put it otherwise, tends to express itself in verse. So much is this so, that we are apt to treat the two as synonymous; when we speak of English poetry we think of the work of our chief verse-writers. But this leads to confusion of terms, if not of thought. Poetry is an affair of the spirit, the intellect, the emotions; it may have more than one form of utterance. There is no real antithesis between poetry and prose, for we find highly poetical prose and highly prosaic verse. Coleridge thought the true antithesis was between poetry and science; it is perhaps better to say, between the poetical and the scientific ways of stating a thing. The scientific way aims simply at stating the fact, and stating it in the clearest, most precise, most rigidly accurate words. The poetical states the very same truth in such a manner as to arouse our feelings. The connexion between poetry and emotion is thus again made manifest, and the contrast between the two outward forms in which poetry expresses itself

<sup>1</sup> In my first three paragraphs use has been made of letters contributed to *The Times Literary Supplement* in September 1920.

should be called a contrast not between poetry and prose but between prose and verse.

This helps us to understand a fact often noted, but seldom explained, namely, that verse usually precedes prose in the literature of a nation—the more difficult medium, as some would say, preceding the easier. The reason seems obvious. People would not think of putting important pronouncements into the language of ordinary talk. Oracles, maxims, gnomic sayings, even laws, would naturally take metrical form. Herodotus doubtless regarded his writings as merely a form of conversation ; his desire was that of the scientist, to narrate and describe facts. How quickly the artistic Greek mind recognized the potentialities of this new medium, how splendidly it exploited them, we all know. But we also see why the conception of it did not come sooner, why Homer and Hesiod, Solon and Theognis, Xenophanes and Empedocles and Heraclitus, did not think of entrusting their work to prose. The same phenomenon, I imagine, occurs in other literatures. *Beowulf* in our own, the *Nibelungen Lied* in German, the *Chanson de Roland* in French, point in this direction.

Verse is one form of measured speech. Measures must have to do with either space or time. Spatial measures readily suggest themselves, especially to those long accustomed to see printed poems, but it can hardly be doubted that time is the real measurer of verse, metre having even been once described as “time heard”. The ear, not the eye, is the measurer. Trying, as we naturally do, to analyse the nature of the measures in question, to resolve a piece of verse into its constituent units, English people will at once recognize a factor of great consequence. Our habit of speech makes us accentuate more forcibly either every second, or in somewhat fewer cases every third, syllable, and to this there are only rare exceptions. Instinctively, therefore, we divide verse into units containing respectively either two or three syllables. (Readers of recent verse may wish to add a third form of unit containing normally four syllables, but this is unnecessary ; such units are really a branch of the first class.) These units are differentiated by an increase of force at the beginning—or, if we prefer the arrangement, at the end—of each. Not that this is theoretically essential. A slight elevation of tone, or a slight pause, would effect the same result. It is our habit of speech that makes us prefer our method ; other languages, other literatures, may not use it. We are here concerned only with natural English verse, and it undoubtedly makes accent its measurer of time. So far, however, we are dealing only with mental phenomena. The accentuation thus postulated is in our minds, an affair of its instinctive action. Particular attention is invited to this fact, for nearly all our prosodists have failed to dis-

tinguish between it and the actual stresses of ordinary speech, which may or may not coincide with its postulates.

They have also, in a different direction, been often led astray by early acquaintance with verse framed on a speech-habit quite unlike ours. The Greeks and Romans of Classical times paid such attention to the comparative durations of syllables, and so little to the varying amounts of force with which they were uttered—which must therefore have been so slight as to escape notice—that they were able to base their metres on a roughly general, and in some respects arbitrary, classification of syllables into ‘long’ and ‘short’. No such classification has ever existed in English. Of course, some of our syllables occupy more time in uttering than others, but this is a fact to which we pay no attention whatever, the ordinary educated person being usually unaware even of its existence. The reason is sufficiently obvious. We have an immensely powerful stress-accent, more powerful than that of any other European nation, though we share the tendency to it with languages nearest akin to ours; its full force is best recognized by comparing the utterance of Parisian French. This reduces all other distinctions among syllables to insignificance, and is the one element in our speech-structure of which we are habitually conscious. The desire to find in our verse parallel phenomena to those in ancient Greek and Latin verse is therefore at once futile and misleading. Recent attempts to frame English verse-structure on a Classical basis have conclusively shown, not for the first time, how entirely exotic and unfamiliar such productions are; and the assumption that our verse must contain “feet” in some way corresponding to those found in Classical verse is equally unwarrantable. It is an *ignis fatuus* which has lured critics into positions devoid of any firm ground.

Returning now to study of facts, we find our minds compelled to divide verse into units which seem to present successions, sometimes of two syllables and sometimes of three. These may be diagrammed as | *xx* | and | *xxx* | respectively. The symbol *x*<sup>1</sup> denotes a syllable taken *per se*, irrespective of its structure or even its accentuation. But the slightest inquiry shows this analysis insufficient. The successions are not unbroken. Units containing three syllables meet us in what is normally dissyllabic verse, units containing only two in what is normally trisyllabic verse. Nor does it follow that the syllables alone constitute the unit. Fractional suspensions of sound are felt to exist between words, and even between syllables. Mere numeration does

<sup>1</sup> I borrow the use of this convenient symbol from a friend (Prof. Sonnenschein), but the idea which it represents has formed part of my conception of English verse from the very beginning.

not suffice. We become conscious that the aim of our analysis is to discover units which are temporally equal to each other—equal, that is, in point of duration. Counting of syllables will not give us this, nor analysis of their bulk or individual duration ; to which also, as has just been said, we habitually pay no attention whatever. It can be attained, and our instinctive desire satisfied, only by taking broader views : by studying the flow, the movement, the *rhythm* of each successive line. When we do this, endeavouring to find units of at least approximately equal durations, we reach a conception ignored by most metrists, that of time-structure as the basis of metre ; and we shall, I think, be compelled to realize that our so-called dissyllabic verse moves to “Common”, our so-called trisyllabic to “Triple”, Time.

Here we come face to face with a fact of universal significance, by no means confined to music, though that is the region in which most of us first make acquaintance with it. The distinction between Common and Triple Time—we need not here drag in further refinements of five-beat and seven-beat rhythm, the possibility of whose existence was till recently denied, but which occur in modern music—this broad distinction meets us everywhere. An audience stamping their feet in “Kentish fire” uses the former. A horse changing its gait passes from common time in the trot to triple in the canter, and to another form of common time when he breaks into a gallop. Three paviours beating a post with their mallets unfailingly manifest triple-time rhythm. The marvel would be if verse alone stood outside this universal tendency. Prosodists who have failed to recognize this may be asked to account for such an anomaly. They cannot do so. Tempting it may be to imagine that there is but one ultimate unit of metre, differing only in the number of syllables from time to time packed into it, but this imagination will not bear the test of inquiry. The distinction between common and triple time, prevalent wherever sound is concerned, conditions also our verse.

Poets have a ready means of showing to which of these a poem is set. By placing a syllable carrying in prose a more or less strong stress at each place where the instinct of division operates they externalize the mental accent, and make their rhythm physically audible. This is a factor in our verse of such immense importance that it is not wonderful to find it exalted by critics into being the sole and absolute constituent of our metres. In so regarding it, however, they show themselves blind to other salient facts. Our poets have always exercised their inalienable right to fall back on the simple | *xx* | or | *xxx* | formation, doing so by giving us syllables which for all practical purposes are equally possessed, or equally devoid, of physical speech-stress. A few examples will make this clear.

Take, for instance, any such line as this of Shakespeare's :

The ploughman lost his sweat, and the green corn . . .

Your ordinary prosodist is happy with the first three units, because in them accentual alternation is regular, but he is puzzled by what follows. His theory compelling him to make ordinary prose speech-stress the index of rhythm, he is driven to adopt such scensions as | sweat, and the | green | corn |, though no one but himself imagines the line to be of any but dissyllabic structure. The | *xx* | unit gives the key to his problem. Take, again, Tennyson's line in a shorter metre :

Ring out, wild bells, to the wild sky.

Here we have three pairs of syllables of practically equal value, while among them comes one pair of practically equal no-value. The reciter, and still more the singer, is so taken aback by this that he hurries rapidly over "to the", and follows with something like "wi-ld sky". But no one can think that is how Tennyson meant his line to be read. By choosing those six weighty syllables he has given a level spondaic effect. Had he so treated the third pair, say by writing

Ring out, wild bells, through yon wild sky,

the line would have been too heavy, so he avoids this by introducing a pair of light and unimportant syllables. To suppose this line built on a mere basis of ordinary speech-stress is to ignore patent facts. Finally, listen to a congregation singing "The Church's one foundation". When they come to "And the great Church victorious" you can almost hear them hesitate over the first two words. But the music comes to their rescue by compelling them to give equal value to each of the first four words. They are obliged, whether they will or no, to fall back on the primary | *xx* | *xx* | basis, which alone at this point explains the line's metrical structure. When reading, we perhaps get over the difficulty by forcibly stressing the "And", but this is a mere evasion. In trisyllabic metres, I may add, it is the exception rather than the rule for one syllable to predominate markedly over both the others.

Critical necessities have already caused us to pass from considering units to considering the whole line of which they form a part. Some critics treat this aggregation of units as an artificial and often misleading anatomy of verse-fabric. They would break up Milton's blank verse into sense-clauses, printing a well-known passage in some such way as this :

Thus with the year seasons return,  
But not to me returns day,  
Or the sweet approach of even or morn.

and so on. Such an attitude shows strange insensibility to metrical effect. Doubtful cases do sometimes arise, when it is difficult to know whether a passage should be regarded as one line or as two. Even then, however, the poet's decision carries weight, produces its effect; witness our different reaction to the earlier and the later editions of Browning's poem "Saul". But, as a general rule, lines form a definite part of a poem's effect. In my own experience, it is an essential part. I cannot think of a poem except as thus conditioned. When I recall a particular one to memory, I recall it line by line, and cannot imagine myself doing otherwise. Normally, a slight pause follows each line in my mind. When the sense forbids this being made actual, I try to mark the final syllable of that line in some other way, by increased force or heightened tone. When, for example, Tennyson writes:

But I was first of all the kings who drew  
The knighthood errant of this realm, and all  
The realms, together under me their king,

I am compelled thus to signalize the words *drew* and *all*, and I do this even when merely reproducing the lines in my consciousness. In this way I remind myself that there should be a "suspensive pause" after these words, did not the sentence continue without intermission from one line to the next. I must be allowed, therefore, to treat this factor as a vital part of any poem.

What actually determines the length of a line is a different and interesting question. One ingenious critic believes that *eight units* is the natural length, determined by our power of uttering words in one breath, but that the eighth unit is normally left blank, to let the speaker fill his lungs again. This gives the "fourteener", or line of fourteen syllables, so common in our older poets, now usually printed as two lines in the "Common Metre" of our Psalm and Hymn books, and familiar in so many ballads. It is a plausible theory, especially when the first and third lines in this latter form are unrhymed, making one feel two consecutive lines to be really parts of one line. But doubts arise when we apply the theory to trisyllabic units. A line of eight, or even of seven, such units would be more than ordinary lungs can compass in a breath. Again, when the eighth unit in dissyllabic verse is not left blank, as in "Long Metre"—of which *Old Hundredth* is a specimen—are we conscious of any loss of a space for taking breath? Are we conscious of it when repeating a long passage of 'octosyllabic' lines? Lastly, this theory relegates what is, after all, by far the largest and most important portion of our verse, that in dissyllabic lines of five units ('decasyllabic'), to the position of a mere intruder, brought in by Italian and French influences. There is some

historical truth in this view, and the fact of our preference for a line with an odd number of units certainly needs explanation. But I cannot believe that our "heroic" metre, as it is often called, is so entire a parvenu and intrusive outsider as this theory proclaims it.

That length of line is associated with ease of utterance and co-ordination seems highly probable. Oliver Wendell Holmes wrote on the subject in a paper on "The Physiology of Verification", but pushed it to somewhat fanciful lengths, claiming that Anacreon must have breathed more quickly than Homer, and Prior than Spenser. I am somewhat inclined to think that lines of *four units* (in normally disyllabic metre called 'octosyllabic') are the lines most original, native, and familiar to English readers or hearers. They are certainly found in the very earliest stages of our literature, and have retained their popularity in spite of the great predominance of five-unit lines. An even number of units does seem somehow more natural, more likely to be primitive, than an uneven. But perhaps this is to "consider too curiously"; national preferences are often difficult to account for.

A line, of whatever length, having been devised by a poet, instinct prompts him to follow it by a line of the same pattern. Thus we get the "couplet", the simplest form of metrical type, two lines conjoined by some sort of similar ending, which in English is usually effected by rhyme. The start once thus made, the way is now open for all kinds of further developments, lines being rhymed alternately or cross-wise in simple or complicated arrangements. It would be waste of time to enumerate detailed varieties of these. Suffice it to say that bewilderment would soon set in if variety ran too wild, that need is felt for simplicity underlying divergences, to maintain a feeling of unity, and that one natural way of effecting this is for a poet to stop after a certain number of lines, make a break, and start afresh, repeating in his second flight whatever arrangement pleased him in his first. Thus we get the "stanza", simple or complex as the case may be, and obviously capable of almost infinite differences. The point to observe is that we have now got distinct patterns of verse, evolved in the natural and, one may say, instinctive order of growth. It must not be thought that these are rules imposed on the poet from without, prescribed by some bench of judges. No, they are means which he uses to produce a desired effect, instruments which help him to express his thought. The poet, not the critic, discovers the laws of successful verse-making.

Insistence on this truth is particularly needed now, when zeal for novelty has driven some writers into absolute formlessness. Metre and rhyme, they think and proclaim, are mere accidents of verse, trammels which hinder the poet's free expression. A view more

ludicrously false it would be hard to find. So far from being trammels, they are, as has just been shown, helps which poets have instinctively adopted. Discard these from any favourite passage in a poem, and see how much remains of what has been called its mesmeric or hypnotic effect. It by no means follows that poets ought slavishly to copy patterns made by their predecessors. The field is open now as then. Browning invented scores of new metrical patterns. Swinburne on his own lines invented many others. And into old patterns new movements can be introduced; compare the difference between *Paradise Lost* and *Idylls of the King*, between *Endymion* and *Tristram of Lyonesse*. Omission of rhyme, even in lyrical poems, is no novelty. Collins's "Ode to Evening" and Tennyson's "Tears, idle tears" have shown the way, the latter in particular wonderfully giving the effect of a rhymed poem while not using rhyme at all. Matthew Arnold wrote verse both rhymeless and designedly irregular in structure, the general verdict on which is that it often achieves success, though sometimes unfortunately lapsing into sheer prose.

It is not to experiments like these that the slightest objection need be taken, but to attempts by writers who have not thought out the essential conditions of good verse-making, who forget the great German's dictum that only in settled order can freedom exist, and the similar affirmation of an English poet that

In service of true law is liberty,  
And they are slaves who deem revolt can set them free.

The great experimenter in this direction was, of course, Walt Whitman.<sup>1</sup> He tells us explicitly that *Leaves of Grass* contains prose as well as verse, and the assertion is certainly true. Page after page contains sentences which can by no possible theory or analysis be brought within the category of verse. They make, they prefer, no claim whatever to be so regarded. In contrast to these, I do not think he means to place merely the few pieces of his in which he has adopted existing patterns, such as :

O Captain ! my Captain ! our fearful trip is done,  
The ship has weather'd every rack, the prize we sought is won ;  
or even those which approximate to them, like :

Joy, shipmate, joy !  
(Pleas'd to my soul at death I cry).

Rather I take him to refer to the passages we all know best and love most, where the singing quality makes itself felt, and forbids us to regard them as prose. Of such are :

<sup>1</sup> Specially interesting is an article by the Poet Laureate in the number of the *London Mercury* magazine for November 1922, which contains a summing up of the nature and principles of *vers libre* by a writer eminently well qualified to judge.

When lilacs last in the door-yard bloom'd,  
 And the great star early droop'd in the western sky in the night,  
 I mourn'd, and yet shall mourn with ever-returning Spring.

\* \* \* \* \*

Oh what shall I hang on the chamber walls?  
 And what shall the pictures be that I hang on the walls,  
 To adorn the burial-house of him I love?

\* \* \* \* \*

Come, lovely and soothing death!  
 Undulate round the world, serenely arriving, arriving,  
 In the day, in the night, to all, to each,  
 Sooner or later delicate death.

In these, though the length and structure of the lines varies, we are conscious of a norm, of unity in diversity, of a music that bears us along on its current. I do not claim that such music would have sufficed to express all the various sides of Whitman's genius, but I do maintain that such lines, at any rate, must be classed as verse and not as prose.

Now with these compare the opening lines of a "poem" by a recent vers-librettist.<sup>1</sup>

O you  
 Who bow down and worship  
 Before the great god Form,  
 Has it ever chanced  
 Upon a sultry summer afternoon  
 You wandered  
 Down a country lane  
 And lighted  
 On a six-petalled dog-rose?

The idea will readily be grasped; it is that the unusually shaped flower is not to be rejected or despised because of its departure from ordinary type. But do the short, jerky lines in any way help the expression of this idea? Do we get any pleasure from having it thrown at us in this way? Does not the passage seem to us a mere memorandum of the author's, to be one day worked up into appropriate shape, rather than a finished poem? Much recent poetry, in all types of verse, often strikes me as material for future poems rather than accomplished endeavours, and to *vers libre* like this the description seems eminently appropriate.

Many examples might be quoted of both legitimate and illegitimate—in other words, successful and unsuccessful "free verse". Among the former would by common consent be classed the Laureate's poem "London Snow", the wavering, irregular movement of whose lines beautifully illustrates the silent, stealthy, fluttering descent of snow-

<sup>1</sup> Helen Dircks, in a volume entitled *Finding*.

flakes on “ road, roof, and railing ” in a London street. The norm, the unifying basis, of that poem seems to me unmistakable, yet I find that opinions are not fixed about this. Some critics hold that each line contains four units, my vote is for five, while the line of which I have just quoted part will be read by most people as containing six. This shows the erroneousness of a statement made by its author,<sup>1</sup> that in verse based on speech-stresses the number of such stresses is never in doubt. If not in the Master’s own verse, certainly in that of his pupils and followers, we are frequently in doubt as to how many speech-stresses a line is intended to carry. We read “ Past seven o’clock ; time to be gone ” as ordinary ‘ octosyllabic ’ metre, and then find that we are expected to read it with five stresses. Who can say how many there should be in “ Thrice toiled in vain to bring it back ” or in “ After you, pilot ; the pilot woke ”? It is only by comparing other lines of the same pieces, and forcing these into correspondence with them, that we learn the intended structure. Speech-stresses, alike in prose and verse, are so uncertain, so dependent on the speaker’s intention, that their recognition can be assured only when they correspond to time-units ; but when temporal structure is introduced, the metre is no longer one of “ stress-rhythm ” pure and simple. It may be said of such verse as an American writer says of rhythm in general : “ The time aspects are fundamental, the accentual features, while necessary, are not at the root of the phenomena.”<sup>2</sup>

The foregoing has attempted to show, without recourse to theories or preconceptions, exactly what an English poet does when he makes verse. I do not know that quite such an attempt has been made before, though of course all treatises on prosody touch more or less upon it. A few more thoughts, not unconnected with the previous ones, may perhaps usefully be added.

The subjective character of word and sentence accent has just been remarked on. The futility of trying to scan by speech-stresses is amusingly shown by the disputes of prosodists as to which feet are which ! Professor J. B. Mayor found “ five trochees ” in this line of Tennyson’s :

Take your own time, Annie, take your own time.

A real line of trochees would run thus :

Take it easy, Laura, take it easy.

The first line of Tennyson’s “ Alcaics ” on Milton the same writer made consist of “ five iambs, with anapaestic substitution ” ; Tennyson

<sup>1</sup> *Milton’s Prosody* (1921 edition), p. 112.

<sup>2</sup> *Temporal and Accentual Rhythm*, by Warner Brown (1911).

believed himself to be writing quite a different metre. Yet another line of Tennyson's—

Philip, the slighted suitor of old time—

is divided by Professor Saintsbury into feet which M. Verrier is constrained to describe in words which may be Englished thus, "a hodge-podge of mutually antagonistic elements".

Few critics, probably, will refuse to diagnose "two dactyls" [really two 3-time trisyllabic units carrying an accent on the first syllable] as the metre of

Bird of the wilderness,  
Blithesome and cumberless,

or even of

Make no deep scrutiny  
Into her mutiny;

but many will disagree when the same is predicted of

Forward, the Light Brigade!  
Was there a man dismay'd?

and still more when it is asserted of

If the grief died:—but no!  
Death will not have it so.

The latter lines, certainly, seem much more nearly akin to

But wisest Fate says no,  
This must not yet be so.

Our speech-accent, in short, is much too shifting, elusive, and malleable to allow definite structures to be based on it; as well build on shifting sand. Approximate temporary equality, on the other hand, is the same to everybody and under all circumstances.

It must not be supposed, however, as several critics have done, that this implies absolute equality of duration in utterance. Such a mistake should not have been made. No pianist is expected to give each bar of his music the same duration as measured by a metronome; such playing would be condemned as mechanical and deficient in personality. Yet the conception of the bars as equal in length is fundamental, and neither executant nor audience must forget it. With the reading of verse it is just the same. Of course we can dwell on one part of a line, and hurry over another. The mistake comes from the too common belief that the delivery of a line constitutes its actual structure. Yet unless a reader, among all his expressional variations, is conscious of underlying temporal uniformity of units, metrical effect suffers. Good readers of verse know this, and try to make it perceptible in their delivery. And the solitary student, reading "to himself" silently by eye and not by ear, must be conscious of it too, must keep mentally

relating it to the expressional variations. This is the test by which to judge difficult lines, nominally in the same metre, yet differing widely from each other, such as these, in heroic metre :

Cover her face; mine eyes dazzle; she died young.  
And made him bow to the gods of his wives:  
Ilimitable, insuperable, infinite.

Unless the reader can feel *five units* underlying each of these lines, to him they become prose. Webster, Milton, Swinburne, cannot evade this law. No definite rules can be laid down. Much depends on the *rapport* existing between the poet and his readers. Browning, amid all the structural licences of *The Ring and the Book*, seldom goes so far as to disturb this consciousness. The greatest writer may err, and the humblest student is entitled to challenge the judgement of even a Milton, but he should first make sure that he has exhausted all possible means of reconciling sense and metre. Milton, to put it mildly, is more likely to be right than he. The reader's power of apprehension, of co-ordinating apparent diversities, may be at fault. Still, no poet is infallible, and if an overpowering majority of the most skilled critics pronounces reconciliation impossible it will have to be conceded that in this particular case the poet has gone too far, has overstepped permissible limits.

Some readers may ask whether, granting that names like iamb, trochee, &c., are used in a purely Pickwickian sense, it is necessary to discard these familiar terms, which form such a convenient shorthand, and what is proposed to be put in their place. The uncertainty of their definition is a tolerably weighty bar to their retention, but a much stronger objection to their use remains to mention. Almost inevitably, and certainly habitually, people assume that the time of our lines is the same as that of their Classic prototypes, which is a total mistake. Greek dactylic verse is described by themselves as a weighty, sonorous, even-flowing metre, suitable for heroic themes; ours is a lightly tripping measure, cantering not galloping, and for long was thought unsuited to serious poetry. Similarly, their iambic verse is described by them as light and unstable, nearer akin to prose speech, whose unequal division compelled scansion by pairs of feet instead of single feet, so that a line of six feet was called a trimeter. Would any one think this a fit description of the stately music of *Paradise Lost*? Is any one, reading its lines, conscious of triple-time movement, in either its slower waltz or its faster jig-time? Yet our critics, almost without exception, have called Milton's lines iambic; even the leading American prosodist, Sidney Lanier, concurs in this. As, however, he predicates the same of nearly all English verse, from Milton's "Blanks" to "At the close of the day, when the hamlet is

still", and reduces common-time metres to a small and insignificant minority, we may conclude that the ear of this great writer, who did so much otherwise to set prosody on a sound basis, failed him here. I submit that a chief cause of this error was the habit of thinking of English feet as identical in time with their Classic prototypes, and that this alone is a fatal objection to the continued use of the Classic terms in the *Pickwickian* sense referred to.

An advantage of discarding the illegitimate use of these terms is that it leaves us free to use them in their true sense. Feet corresponding in "quantity" to the Greek ones do undoubtedly occur in our speech and verse, though they have no structural significance and therefore we pay no attention to them. The word *quantity* is itself a true dactyl, the word *magazine* an excellent anapaest. It may be doubted, indeed, whether any speaker really gives double duration to the first syllable of the former word or the last of the latter. And this applies to most people's reading of Greek and Latin verse. Accustomed to substitute accent for quantity, they accentuate the first syllable of Homer's or Virgil's dactyls, and believe that in so doing they are "observing quantity". All one need say is that this is not how every contemporary Greek or Roman grammarian tells us that people read such verse. Still, the approximate accuracy when the Classic terms are used in their true sense is distinctly a gain, and furnishes an additional reason for abandoning the illegitimate use.

As to substitutes for these terms, it would be easy to invent new names, and the attempt has more than once been made. The difficulty is to get them adopted. How long would it take to get *march* accepted instead of *iamb* (which does not keep *march*-time), and *trip* instead of *trochee*? If people saw pages studded with words like *midabout* and *outabout*, the mysteries of English prosody would seem darker than ever. Nor is such drastic change necessary. Simpler methods will suffice. Time being the primary constituent, the name must first show whether a line is in duple, triple, or quadruple rhythm. If the now fashionable plan be followed of placing accent always at the beginning of a unit, this would be sufficient description of a line. This plan leaves one syllable solitary at the beginning and end of heroic lines—The | weight of | all the | hopes of | half the | world—obscures the fact that most English sentences, and therefore lines, begin with unaccented words, and degrades the bar-mark by making it merely a guide to accentuation. But most people, thanks to musical preconceptions, seem unable to conceive of accent being normally placed elsewhere; elementary musical treatises even teach that time is created by accent, which we have seen is not true. Should further definition be required, however, as it will be when not whole

lines but individual units are concerned, are *dupe rising* (=iamb) and *dupe falling* (=trochee), with their obvious analogues, too clumsy terms? They cover all the ground. Enough has now perhaps been said about nomenclature and we may turn to other departments of our subject.

It is matter of common knowledge that unaccented syllables can be dropped in trisyllabic verse, their place being really taken by slight silent intervals. So much so, that some critics think that only accented syllables need be regarded; as if only the bones in our bodies needed to be considered. It may be news to some, however, that even accented syllables can sometimes be dropped, not only in trisyllabic verse, and the silent interval be so evident that an imaginary syllable can be placed where there is obviously room for it. Yet this is the case in so familiar a couplet as

Now, by the lips of those ye love, fair gentlemen of France,  
Charge for the golden lilies! upon them with the lance!

The pause after "lilies" is so palpable that any one doubting it can only be recommended to interpolate any word, even an ejaculation like *now!* or *bang* or *boh*, and see how easily it falls into place! When the long lines are divided into two, in what is called "Horatius metre", it may be contended that the pause is possible only at the end of a line, agreeing with the sense, and that the above couplet is really four lines printed as two. But the pause occurs when there is no break whatever in the sense, e.g.:

She crossed the Forum shining with stalls in alleys gay,  
And just had reached the very spot whereon I stand this day.

Read "shining bright with stalls in alleys gay", and the identity of metre in each line is obvious.

Let it not be supposed, however, that a poet can leave out a syllable whenever he likes, and count on his reader supplying its place by an equivalent pause. This point has been raised in connexion with such a line as this of Shakespeare's:

Than the soft myrtle. But man, proud man . . .

"Insert your *boh* after 'myrtle'", it may be said, "and the line becomes perfectly regular." Yes, but there is nothing to compel the reader to make any insertion. If an actor, on the stage, introduces any action which disguises the hiatus—stamps his foot, or smites his brow—he may prevent his hearers from noticing the break, but this does not make the line metrical. It is the presence of syllables in the corresponding part of a corresponding line which impresses the necessity of leaving space for equivalent syllables in the line under consideration. Unless this necessity be felt, the line is unjustified.

To deem otherwise is to substitute chaos for prosody. If non-metrical devices are allowed to correct deficiencies of metre, any sentence may be made verse. The absurdity of such a result speaks for itself.

Not only syllables, but whole units with their systole and diastole, may with advantage be omitted when this necessity is unmistakable. Take these two lines of Browning's :

Thronging through the cloud-rift, whose are they, the faces  
Faint revealed yet sure divined, the famous ones of old ?

Here, obviously, during or after the word "cloud-rift" there is metrical pause. We may either pause for the duration of a whole unit after that word, or we may divide it into two half-units—  
| cloud <sup>^</sup> | rift <sup>^</sup> |, omitting only the unaccented syllables which might have followed each. One or other we must do, if we read the lines as verse, not as prose. And the cause of this compulsion is the presence of equivalent syllables in the next line, thus shown to be identical in metre with its predecessor. Compare a precisely similar case in two lines from a song which occurs in Tennyson's play, *Queen Mary* :

Hapless doom of woman happy in betrothing !  
Beauty passes like a breath, and love is lost in loathing.

Due recognition of structural pause in the former of these two lines makes it identical in metre with the latter.

While time and accent are the only actual constituents of rhythm, other factors contribute to the general effect of verse. Principal among these are pitch and what is called *timbre* or *tone-colour*. Changes of pitch play so important a part in delivery that it cannot be necessary to enlarge on this. About "tone-colour" much has been written by many critics. Some will have it that each sound has its proper significance, its particular emotional effect on the nerves. Such speculations should be taken with a large grain of salt. It is surely clear that the same sounds, in words of different meaning, may express quite different feelings—gravity or gaiety, pathos or furious passion. R. L. Stevenson may call attention to the repetition of F and V in the phrase "fugitive and cloistered virtue", of W and N in the line "Warble his native wood-notes wild", but the more elaborate researches of microscopic investigators into the structure of highly wrought pieces of prose or verse often leave me wondering how much is due to the critic's imagination, how far accident has not been mistaken for design. One feature, however, is unmistakable. Repetition of initial sounds is called alliteration, and this deserves a paragraph to itself.

"Apt alliteration's artful aid" is a good servant, a bad master.

In comic verse it can be exploited endlessly, even to alphabetic rhymes like

An Austrian army, awfully arrayed,  
Boldly by batteries besieged Belgrade.

In serious poetry it plays its part, especially when used to signalize the important words in a line. Swinburne's predilection for it is well known, and with him it fortified metrical structure, but he must have forgotten this function when he perpetrated the lines :

Welling water's winsome word,  
Wind in warm wan weather.

On the other hand, while sufficiently emphasized, I think it is kept sufficiently subordinate in the lovely stanza :

Wells where no beam can burn  
Through frondage of the fern  
That hides from hart and hern  
The haunt it hallows.

In Anglo-Saxon verse it held a leading place, knitting loosely syllabized lines into quadruple rhythm ; and its modern use to mark metrical points may well come from that. Yet perhaps it pleases most when rather used as an under-melody, to be discerned only by attentive ears, occurring at the beginning of the second half of a word, or in even less prominent places. Some highly musical passages in our best poets seem to owe some of their melodiousness to such subtle and recondite use of alliteration.

A word must be said about my adherence to the old-fashioned idea of "inversion". This term is used when two syllables are accented otherwise than as we expected. It occurs very often at the beginning of an ordinary heroic line, as when Pope writes :

Die of a rose in aromatic pain.

The old explanation was that there a trochee was substituted for an iamb. Of late years this is generally ridiculed, and the two syllables are said to form part of a trisyllabic foot, the line being scanned :

| Die of a | rose in | aro- | matic | pain.

I have never felt satisfied with this explanation. Milton sometimes begins a line with *two* such "inversions" following each other consecutively ; how is the earlier of the two to be treated ? Watts-Dunton, in a line evidently meant to be unusual, startling, calling our attention to the speaker's surprise and joy, begins with *three* :

Water ! Water ! Blessed be God, he cries.

How can either word "Water" form part of a trisyllabic foot ? Tennyson, after twice repeating the line :

Out of the deep, my child, out of the deep,

on a third repetition alters it to

Out of the deep, *spirit*, out of the deep.

Is it possible to doubt that he regarded this as a real case of inversion?

On how slender a basis of knowledge or investigation metrical theories can be built is shown by the fact that such inversion is supposed to be rare, and that Shelley was exceptionally bold when instead of "And roses wild" he wrote "And wild roses". It has been also asserted that the thing in question belongs properly to the beginning of a line only, and that when it occurs later it is after a break, so that one has the feeling of, as it were, a second beginning. A single line of Browning's pulverizes this assertion:

What if the sun *crumble*, the sands approach.

Here the inversion actually precedes the break, after which normal structure is resumed in the quietest way. But the absurdity of both positions will be best shown by citing a few examples, to which any one can add indefinitely if he will but notice what he reads. Observe that the examples are chosen for absence of break, and that there seems no restriction on the places in the line where they may occur. I italicize the affected words.

And yet dark night *strangles* the travelling lamp.  
Drew after him the third *part of* Heav'n's host.

*Is the* great chain that draws *all to* agree.

Man never is, but always *to be* blest.

The lone *couch of* his everlasting sleep.

Then tore with bloody talon *the rent* plain.

A *disguised* demon, missionèd to knit.

A haven *beneath* whose translucent floor.

Scarce visible from *extreme* loveliness.

If old things *remain* old things, all is well.

*Courage!* he said, and pointed toward the land.

Guarding his forehead with her round *elbow*.

A *divine* presence in a place divine.

There is no armour *against* fate.

If they should totter, teach them *to stand* fast.

I did not hunt *after*, nor greatly prize.

I saved his wife

Against law; *against* law he slays her now.

So shows my soul before the Lamb,

*My spirit before thee.*

And cross the unpermitted ferry's flow,

*And relax* Pluto's brow.

The only exceptional thing in Shelley's "And wild roses" line is that the inversion is so crudely effected that it seems to start up and hit one in the face. But with care this might have been easily avoided.

It may seem strange that a poet should thus play fast and loose with accent, the very thing on which most people think his verse depends. Yet I do not think it hard to see the reason. I can imagine him saying to his reader: "You have shown yourself able to maintain my metrical pattern when I intentionally blurred its outlines, did not seal every junction with the hammer-blow of speech-stress. Now see if you can follow me a step farther." Having found pleasure himself in occasional contrast between expectation and fulfilment, he wishes us to share that pleasure. And how are we to achieve this object? By falling back on the *x* method. Ignore the prose word-accent, if you cannot otherwise enjoy the line. I feel sure this is how ordinary people treat "among" in Wordsworth's lines:

I travelled among unknown men  
In lands beyond the sea.

We can easily place sufficient stress on the first syllable of "unknown" to justify expectation; we cannot so treat "among". It remains to pass lightly over the word, ignoring its prose stress. The whole little poem gives one the impression of dissyllabic structure throughout. To introduce trisyllabic and monosyllabic feet must be false analysis. Whatever the explanation of the phenomena to which attention has been called, their existence is undeniable. "Inversion" is a fact of English verse.

The aspects of verse are very numerous. When matter as well as manner, poetry as well as metre, are being considered, the investigation becomes one for masters. No such ambitious flights have been attempted here. But it is hoped that these thoughts about the mere technical side of verse may lead to further thoughts in the minds of my readers, especially of those who have hitherto accepted as gospel the dicta of our ordinary prosody-books. It is hoped that these pages will make them see that there is more in the matter than these books recognize—that verse anatomized by a scalpel is not the verse we know and admire—that no prosody scanning merely by speech-stresses can cover the ground, or account for the complexities of our best verse—that accent of any kind, even mental accent, is secondary and not primary—that *time* is fundamental here as elsewhere, and that all scansion worthy of the name must go back to it as the most elementary factor of all.

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